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ABSTRACT

Developed by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), this report presents current weaknesses in the education of students with learning problems (those having difficulties learning for any of a variety of reasons) and suggested strategies for correcting those weaknesses. The goal of effective education for all students is noted and progress made since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) reviewed. The high dropout and illiteracy rates are indicators of a continuing problem. Special programs may themselves contribute to the problem due to the following features: fragmented approach created by compartmentalized delivery systems, dual administrative arrangements for special and regular programs, stigmatization of students placed in special programs, and frequent transformation of the placement decision into a battleground between parents and school. Recent experience has shown that the most effective solution is to adapt regular programs so that students with learning problems can succeed in the regular classroom. Recommended strategies for assisting the student in the regular class include: (1) increased instructional time; (2) support systems for teachers; (3) empowerment of principals to control all programs and resources at the building level; and (4) new instructional approaches. OSERS is committed to encouraging the partnership of special and regular education and to increase individualization of instruction through support of research and demonstration, personnel preparation, and special studies program priorities. (DB)

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EDUCATING STUDENTS WITH LEARNING PROBLEMS— A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

OFFICE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION
AND REHABILITATIVE SERVICES
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

NOVEMBER 1986

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EDUCATING STUDENTS WITH LEARNING PROBLEMS— A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

A Report to the Secretary

BY

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WASHINGTON, D.C.
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INTRODUCTION

In the Fall of 1985, the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) began an effort to assess the status of the nation's programs for helping students who have learning problems.1/ The core of this effort was an OSERS Task Force which held discussions with general, special, and compensatory education teachers, administrators, parents and members of the academic community. This paper is a reflection of these discussions and attempts to set forth what Task Force members believe are ways our nation's schools can improve the education of students who have learning problems.

In arriving at these recommendations, the Task Force delineated what it perceived to be weaknesses in current approaches to the education of students with learning problems and suggested strategies for correcting these weaknesses. It is worth noting that the problems with current practice set forth in this paper and the recommended alternatives are not entirely based on the results of exhaustive research, but are also the studied thoughts of a number of parents and professionals. As such, the contents of the paper are a synthesis of their views and recommendations as well as research integration on this issue.

Finally, the paper should be viewed as a basis for discussion. We ask that readers regard the paper as a request for their best thinking about additional strategies for improving the education of students with learning problems. We think that program improvement requires the full and free exchange of ideas and creative responses; and we are issuing this paper as the basis for the beginning of such an interchange.

1/ In this paper, the term "learning problem" is used broadly to address children who are having learning difficulties, including those who are learning slowly; those with behavioral problems; those who may be educationally disadvantaged; and those who have mild specific learning disabilities, and emotional problems; and perhaps, as we improve our knowledge, those with more severe disabilities.

THE GOAL

Traditionally, this nation has set the highest goals and expectations for all citizens. And the link between individual attainment and our educational system is critical; we want the most effective education possible for our students. This goal applies to all students, but especially to those with exceptional educational needs. One of the groups in our society with exceptional needs is students with learning problems.

Statistics on the growth of the number of special programs to help students with learning problems in the past two decades, as well as increases in the number of students in these programs, demonstrate our commitment to these students. For example, of the 42 million children in our public schools in 1984-85, some 1.8 million (4 percent) were classified as "learning disabled" and placed in special education programs. These figures represent an increase of 34,000 students over the year before, and more than a million in the past decade.

Another 10-20 percent of the students who are not classified as handicapped, have learning, language, or behavior problems that impede their educational progress. Many of them also have been placed in special programs--compensatory education programs, remedial programs, bilingual programs, migrant programs to mention a few--which are designed to bring them in contact with a more effective teacher or curriculum.

Over the past two decades America has met the challenge of addressing the needs of students with learning problems primarily through the creation of a number of special programs. They were designed with the best of motivations and, it is fair to state, to make achievement and academic growth possible for America's students. Each of the programs mentioned earlier has contributed significantly to this stated goal. Each has also expanded our pedagogical and technological base for selected segments of the student population. For example, special education, in the 10th year since the passage of P.L. 94-142 has:

1. Refined the concept and practice of individualized instruction;

2. Re-defined the role of parents in the education of the handicapped child;

3. Made education possible for one-half million previously unserved severely handicapped children;

4. Improved services for several million other handicapped children.

Special education and remedial programs have made substantial contributions to improving the quality of instructional practice. For one, a number of highly structured curricula have been developed which prescribe the precise order of information to be learned. Also, recently developed curriculum-based assessment approaches allow for finer distinctions to be made in determining where to begin instruction and specifying what a child can do in relation to a task to be learned. Finally, improved evaluation and record-keeping procedures have helped to insure that information contained in the remedial plan is indeed learned.

THE PROBLEM

The achievements of the special programs have moved us toward our goal of effective education for those with learning problems. We have achieved much of our goal but, unfortunately, not all of it. There is clearly some evidence that our system for educating these students is not completely succeeding when outcome measurements such as graduation rates and employment rates are analyzed.

For example, it is expected that about 25 percent of all high school students will drop out of school before graduation. Many of these dropouts are students with learning problems who have not succeeded in special programs. In addition to the dropout rate, recent studies and surveys indicate that up to 17 percent of all Americans are illiterate. For recent high school graduates, the functional illiteracy rate is above 30 percent. A study of high school seniors found that most leave high school without the reading comprehension skills needed in college. In 1985, more than one-third of middle school students in one urban school system were not eligible for promotion without remedial work during the summer.

The consequences of our lack of success in helping these students shows up in other statistics. Sooner or later these young people leave school. Students with learning problems who have not succeeded in school are also likely to fail in getting and keeping jobs. For example, data indicate that many special education students are not likely to get jobs when they graduate. In turn, the lives of these young people are more likely to be associated with poverty and isolation.

ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM

If the data are correct, we are not completely achieving our goal of meeting the educational needs of students with learning problems. Why is this? From the Task Force discussion, a general theme emerged which can provide an answer. This theme is that, although special programs have achieved much, other problems have emerged which create obstacles to effective education of students with learning problems.

There should be no misunderstanding of this point. Parents and educators alike are enthusiastic in their praise of special programs like the one created by the Education of the Handicapped Act. The impetus for enactment of a law to create special programs for handicapped children was the desire on the part of Congress to address several issues. First, Congress declared in the Act that all handicapped children have a right to education, thereby resolving the debate as to whether some children were too impaired to learn. Second, in fashioning special education service programs for these children, Congress acknowledged a governmental and social obligation to provide access to educational services and the resources to underpin them.

The OSERS Task Force on Children with Learning Problems has sought to draw attention to issues which go beyond those of basic entitlements and resources to a second generation of issues concerned with the quality and effectiveness of education for children with special needs. Thus, the term "obstacle" should

be read with some caution. It is not used to imply that special programs have failed dismally in their mission to educate children with learning problems. Nor should it suggest that the existing general system of education for these children warrants radical reform and redesign. The term is used to convey the idea that the creation of special programs has produced unintended effects, some of which make it unnecessarily cumbersome for educators to teach--as effectively as they desire--and children to learn--as much and as well as they can.

The rest of this paper is a treatment of the obstacles outlined by the Task Force and suggestions for fine-tuning our educational system to allow for more effective education of a distinct population of children.

Obstacles in Special Programs

Specialized programs help students with learning problems to achieve. As mentioned earlier, both improved educational technology and instructional strategies have altered the teaching process for teachers and the outcomes for children. But difficulties continue. These special programs originate from various laws, have various funding patterns, run according to various rules and regulations, and offer a fragmented approach to many different, but related, learning problems. These characteristics of special programs present the following four significant obstacles to the most effective education possible for students with learning problems.

(1) Fragmented approach

Many students with learning problems do not fit neatly into the compartmentalized delivery systems created by special programs. The students are often not served adequately in the regular classroom and are not "eligible" for special education or other special programs because they do not meet State or Federal eligibility requirements. In effect, many students who require help and are not learning effectively fall "through the cracks" of a program structure based on preconceived definitions of eligibility, rather than individual student needs and, as a result, do not receive assistance.

Put another way, the advantage of special programs is precision in targeting resources. Eligible students, if classified reliably, are assured of receiving the financial support, protections, and safeguards that are available under these programs. But there is also a powerful disadvantage: In an approach to programming that targets groups of eligible students rather than services, there are few educational alternatives for children who, for one reason or another, do not meet the existing eligibility requirements for these programs. It might also be pointed out that some students who may need help, but who are not handicapped, are sometimes misclassified and placed in programs for mildly disabled students in order to get help.

Special programs also provide local districts with an incentive to identify students as being in need of special services because of financial "premiums" the districts will receive for providing these services. This tendency cuts in more

than one direction, however, because the financial incentives for placement can easily lead to poor educational decisions--the child is put where the money is, with too little regard for educational need. In effect, the assistance the child needs in addressing his or her learning problem is, in many cases, predetermined by the availability of a particular program. Not enough attention is given to assessing individual learning needs and tailoring a specific program to meet those needs. This results in a failure to meet the child's unique learning needs to the greatest extent possible.

(2) The dual system

The separate administrative arrangements for special programs contribute to a lack of coordination, raise questions about leadership, cloud areas of responsibility, and obscure lines of accountability within schools. Most school administrators take the view that responsibility for students with learning problems belongs to special education or other special programs. These programs are usually the responsibility of the central office of the school district, but are delivered at the building level. This means that building principals do not develop ownership of the programs' educational goals. Nor are building principals always authorized or disposed to ensure the consistent high quality of special programs. As a result principals may not be able to use their influence to set the high expectations and standards for students with learning problems nor encourage teachers to "go the extra mile" for these children. Hence, the impact of these programs is lessened.

The problem at the building level is further compounded by special program teachers working independently with students either in small groups or individually in resource rooms. This isolation minimizes communication between special teachers and regular classroom teachers, resulting in a lack of coordination between ongoing classroom instruction and the specially designed remedial instruction. The result is that the remedial instruction does not complement or help the child with the curricula which he or she must master in the regular class.

(3) Stigmatization of students

When students with learning problems are segregated from their non-handicapped schoolmates and labels attached to them, stigmatization can result. The effects of stigmatization may serve to further isolate these students from their peers and increase negative attitudes about school and learning. The consequences of stigmatization and poor self-esteem have been fully described in the literature: low expectations of success, failure to persist on tasks, the belief that failures are caused by personal inadequacies, and a continued failure to learn effectively. In addition, negative staff attitudes, as a result of the stigma of special class placement can create an atmosphere which further hampers the student's learning.

(4) The placement decision as battleground

Parents naturally want the best for their children, a desire that leads some parents to interpret rigid rules and eligibility requirements of special programs as

indications that school officials are unwilling to help. For their part, schools are often ready to fall back on the stereotype of the "pushy parent," especially when requests for services and the insistence on a stronger voice in decision-making create inconvenience, embarrassment, and confusion. As a result, a potential partnership is turned into a series of adversarial, hit-and-run encounters.

HOW CHILDREN CAN BE EDUCATED MORE EFFECTIVELY - A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM

The predominant instructional strategy for dealing with the problems of students with learning difficulties is, in fact, an administrative one. It is to remove these students from the regular class and to place them in a resource room or special class--in common educational jargon, the "pullout approach." This approach is backed by a storehouse of good intentions--but its effectiveness is often limited by the obstacles described above. Although for some students the "pullout approach" may be appropriate, it is driven by a conceptual fallacy: that poor performance in learning can be understood solely in terms of deficiencies in the student rather than deficiencies in the learning environment.

The logic of the approach works this way: A student is performing poorly as a learner; we can even measure the gap between him and his peers. Because his peers are performing acceptably in the same environment, the trouble must be with the student. If we remove him from the regular classroom to a special program to work on his problems, we can remediate the problem and return the student to the original placement.

The major flaw in this argument is the premise that to improve student performance we always have to create a new educational environment. Recent experience has shown there is an alternative. This is to adapt the regular classroom to make it possible for the student to learn in that environment. By doing this--by delivering service far more often than is now common in the regular classroom--we can avoid the obstacles to educating students with learning problems posed by special programs which we have identified.

STUDENTS WITH LEARNING PROBLEMS IN THE REGULAR EDUCATION CLASSROOM

Parents of children with learning problems often point out that the regular education classroom was the environment in which their child failed to learn in the first place. Therefore, they view a return to the regular classroom with skepticism. After all, from their viewpoint, special programs are providing some help for their child.

The belief has emerged over the past two decades that regular education has little responsibility and expertise to help children with learning problems, particularly those children who can qualify for a special program. In fact, as more children have been served through these special programs, regular education has had fewer and fewer incentives to do so. Therefore, it is not surprising that regular education has not learned how to serve these children in the way that special programs have. Nor has regular education learned the teaching techniques, curricula strategies and other competencies that special programs have developed and used successfully over the years. The challenge is to take what we have learned from

the special programs and begin to transfer this knowledge to the regular education classroom. This challenge is not only to transfer knowledge, it is also to form a partnership between regular education and the special programs and the blending of the intrinsic strengths of both systems.

This challenge comes at an opportune time. We see today a new confidence on the part of many regular and special program educators that children with learning problems can be effectively served in the regular education classroom. In addition, there is increasing evidence that it is better academically, socially, and psychologically to educate mildly handicapped children with nonhandicapped children, preferably within the regular education classroom.

The OSERS Task Force provided useful insights into the obstacles created by special programs to serving children with learning problems. The Task Force also provided valuable perspectives on obstacles in regular education and identified some strategies which may be useful in overcoming these obstacles. What follows is a summary of those perspectives.

Obstacles in Regular Classrooms

Even a cursory assessment of what students with learning problems encounter in the regular education classroom reveals obstacles to learning and the need for multi-pronged strategies to assist the student with his or her learning needs.

(1) Increased instructional time

A lock-step grade system is based upon the assumption that all students learn the same skills and content using the same materials within the same period. This assumption is not supported by either theory or fact.

The "golden mean" assumption of public instruction--which says that if a 6th grade class has children whose reading proficiency spans the 3rd to 9th grades, then the reading material should be targeted to the 6th grade level--is certain to lose students at both extremes; they will get instruction that neither fits their capabilities nor meets their needs. More important, the pressure on teachers to teach a prescribed curriculum on schedule may not provide adequate time or motivation to plan for and meet the unique needs of individual students.

An insufficient amount and inefficient use of instructional time can be serious hindrances to the education of students with learning problems. The average school year is comprised of 180 six-hour days. After attending school for 12 years, students will have spent only 18 percent of their waking hours in school; for students with learning difficulties that may not be enough. In addition, some instructional time is lost. Recent studies indicate that some schools are providing only 17 hours of instruction per week, and the average school provides only 22 hours per week. Thus, on the average, in a 30-hour week, more than a quarter of the already limited instructional time slips through the cracks--time that students with learning problems can ill afford to lose.

Students who learn more slowly may need to move through the curriculum at a different pace, and may require more structure, more supervision, or more instructional time. They may require modified texts or supplementary materials. They may learn better in smaller groups or individually than as members of an average-sized class.

(2) Support systems for teachers

Students with learning problems demand more of teachers in terms of both time and specialized assessment and teaching strategies. Without support, regular classroom teachers often struggle to find ways to cope with the varying needs these students present. This pressure often leads to resentment and frustration. And frustration, coupled with the mistaken belief that special programs are a panacea, makes referral to special programs a highly likely alternative. Effective education under these circumstances is difficult.

The ability of regular education teachers to serve students with learning problems can be greatly enhanced by establishing building level support teams to assist the classroom teachers in: (a) informally assessing learning problems, (b) developing regular education alternatives and solutions to instructional problems, and (c) providing a support system in the classroom through the use of aides or team teaching strategies.

In addition, classroom teachers themselves can be trained in providing the personalized assessment and instruction needed by students with learning

problems. Currently teachers are not often trained in educational diagnosis and assessment and view these procedures as unrelated to instructional programming. As a result, they tend to view these methods as formalities which have little to do with classroom activities. Instead, regular classroom teachers need to acquire more skills in assessment and planning educational alternatives for students experiencing learning problems.

(3) Empower principals to control all programs and resources at the building level

As previously stated in this paper, the administration of special programs is often not the responsibility of the building principal. This absence of authority reduces the ability of the principal to blend programs and resources in the building to bring together what is required to help the student in the regular classroom.

In addition, principals are constrained by administrative rules and regulations which prevent classroom teachers from getting the support they need to help students in their classrooms. In many cases under present rules and regulations, special help for students with learning problems can be triggered only after their problems have become severe enough for them to become eligible for special programs. Thus, if a fifth grade teacher becomes aware that one of his students is reading at a third grade level, the teacher may not be able to get special services for the child until the child falls even further behind. The threshold of severe failure must be crossed prior to the delivery of service. Education would benefit

greatly by adopting an early intervention model which would make services available before the student develops a severe education problem, when intensive intervention is required to "save" the student. The time to work on a reading problem is when it appears, not three years later when it becomes serious enough to warrant specialized services.

Principals are also constrained by rules and regulations which discourage or prevent serving students with learning problems in the regular education classroom. The case of a midwestern junior high school is an example of what can happen. The language arts and learning disabilities teachers designed and team-taught classes for learning disabled students and for others with reading difficulties who were not diagnosed as learning disabled. During the six years the program operated, only two students required additional help from the special education system, in contrast to the 18 students who had been referred during the three years prior to the team-teaching program. Yet in spite of the program's success, the State education agency stopped providing funds for the learning disabilities teacher because she was serving students who were not diagnosed as learning disabled. The program was terminated, which resulted in an immediate rise in the referral rate to special education programs.

The literature on "effective schools" clearly suggests that educational change starts at the building level. The building principal is the school's educational leader and the catalyst for change. He or she is the key to implementing an integrated, cohesive educational plan to bring together regular and special programs

at the point of delivery. It is the principal who must set expectations for students with learning problems and their teachers and who must use the array of resources at the command of the school district to prevent or overcome learning problems. A clear structure of leadership must be established in the schools, with the object of creating comprehensive coordinated approaches to helping learners with difficulties.

Above all, it is the principal who must forge the disparate members of the school staff into a working team, motivated by a desire to help struggling children learn more effectively. In different terms, principals must be empowered to create programs that can build individualized education plans based on the needs of children, plans shaped to fit the availability of resources.

(4) New instructional approaches

In the regular education classroom, instructional approaches which are successful with the average student do not always work with students who have learning problems. Successful instructional approaches developed and used by special programs to help students with learning problems emphasize productive learning experiences.

Examples are: personalized curricula geared to individual learning needs and styles; a formal database (by computer when possible) that keeps track of student progress; reduced class size; increased time in school; more efficient use of available time; and the use of controlled teaching steps. Instruction in social skills should be emphasized to counteract stigmatization and to reinforce self-

esteem. The total of these instructional approaches are within our ability to be brought into the regular classroom and used within that setting to modify the existing curricula and methods where they are not working for students with learning problems.

Although there are many successful strategies which can be brought into the regular classroom, two examples are useful to illustrate the classroom adaptations that are needed. One such strategy utilizes a building-based change model which is intended to lead teachers to modify their referral habits; it provides for a range of instructional procedures so that students with learning problems can be effectively served in the regular classroom. This model focuses on engaging the building principal in an active and purposeful participatory planning process with regular, special education, and other support staff. The purpose of this planning is to institute a series of instructional options within the regular classroom structure. The availability of consulting teacher models, Teacher Assistance Teams, and cooperative learning strategies is intended to provide sufficient options to accommodate all children with learning problems in the regular classroom.

Another strategy developed for secondary-level students in regular classroom settings focuses not only on the subject matter to be learned, but also on how to learn. Using an expert system developed in the area of artificial intelligence, this approach suggests that students with learning problems utilize inefficient trial-and-error learning methods to solve problems. This program

seeks to identify and develop study strategies to improve student goal-setting, strategy selection, monitoring, and self-evaluation in order to enhance student performance in regular classroom settings.

AN EXPERIMENTAL APPROACH TO CHANGE

The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) believes that the experiences and knowledge of special education and other programs for students with learning problems can be applied successfully in the regular classroom with the adaptations outlined in the previous section of this paper. OSERS therefore invites and encourages the education community to join us in trying to better serve as many children with learning problems as possible in the regular classroom, as we look to extend the dramatic promise of special education to regular education.

OSERS believes as a general rule that pilot programs are certainly preferable to "quick fix," mandated change. Solid programs with demonstrated success records can be replicated without placing students at additional risks. However, the design of pilot programs should include systematic and rigorous monitoring and documentation of results to assure student protection. Student data should be gathered to document both successes and failures. Teachers, teacher educators, policymakers, administrators, advocates, and parents must be committed to the desired change and to the process of policy revision that must follow. Most important, in no case should existing protections be diminished, nor should the rights of individual children be denied.

In particular, school personnel must be prepared to experiment. Creating innovative programs for students with learning problems will change people's jobs and their work relationships. They will spend more time working cooperatively, acquiring new knowledge, and learning more about one another's jobs. These are exciting possibilities.

Teachers and administrators will need inservice training to develop and manage innovative programs. These programs should emphasize a competency-based approach, with each participant acquiring validated competencies in the required core areas. Inservice training can be provided through local staff development centers, self-paced programs, correspondence programs, televised courses, and internships. The chances for success of inservice programs will rise if participants have incentives such as release-time, career ladders, and formal credit with local colleges and universities.

A CHALLENGE AND A COMMITMENT

The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services is committed to increasing the educational success of children with learning problems. OSERS challenges States to renew their commitment to serve these children effectively. The heart of this commitment is the search for ways to serve as many of these children as possible in the regular classroom by encouraging special education and other special programs to form a partnership with regular education. The objective of the partnership for special education and the other special programs is to use their knowledge and expertise to support regular education in educating children with learning problems.

Clearly, however, the States and local agencies are the change agents who operate the schools. Logically then, they will have the lead in this undertaking. The role of OSERS will be a supportive one, focusing on the provision of funding for research, model demonstrations, evaluation, and training to assist State and local agencies with experimentation.

Specifically, the Office of Special Education Programs within OSERS will provide research and demonstration, personnel preparation and special studies program priorities to support these activities. In fact, funding has already begun. A series of cooperative evaluation studies with SEA's have been funded in the past two years which have allowed SEA's to develop and document new service delivery models, such as building resource teams. Also, the Research Projects Branch has funded a number of programs to develop instructional options designed to maintain children with learning problems within the regular education environment.

Education is not free, and good schools are not cheap. However, the alternative approaches suggested in this paper do not call for block grants, commingling of funds or increases in financial resources. We believe experimentation can be conducted by allocating and redirecting resources more effectively. For instance, financial support for special education aides to work with learning disabled children in the regular classroom can be provided under current Federal rules. We must again stress, however, experimentation must be conducted within the boundaries of student and parent rights as set forth under P.L. 94-142 and other Federal programs. The alternative approaches to educating children with learning problems described in this paper have not proposed nor included any waivers of these rights and requirements. We are committed to the protection of these rights.

CONCLUSION

The experience of the last 20 years in assisting children with learning problems has provided some valuable lessons. First, we have been reminded forcefully that there is no child who cannot learn and that there are always better ways of helping each child achieve. Second, we have learned that the way we think about helping children with learning problems and the way we organize our schools to meet their needs must be improved.

But perhaps the greatest lesson over the last 20 years has been the emergence of the principle of personalized instruction as a core component of effective education. In the minds of parents, teachers, and administrators, the idea of individualization according to learning needs has increased in significance--not just for the handicapped student, but for every student.

But the concept of individualization does not fully permeate the way we think and the way we actually go about educating children. It has yet to pervade--let alone command--the way we design educational experiences for students with learning problems and others. Yet that is what it must do, if we are to succeed. To the extent that we remain trapped in programming definitions and funding models dominated by traditional labeling and categorization, to that same extent we will fall short. The basic educational issue for serving this growing group of young people is not finding something to call them so we can put money in a pot with that label on it. The basic issue is providing an educational program that will allow them to learn better.

From that point, we can construct an educational environment that is a broad and rich continuum, rather than a series of discrete programming slots and funding pots. Within that range of available services, we can then pick and choose what we need to construct the program the child needs. We can deliver the resources and provide the personalized instruction each child must have to achieve to his or her greatest potential. In short, we need to visualize a system that will bring the program to the child rather than one that brings the child to the program.